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THE ASSOCIATION OF EX-REGULAR MEMBERS OF THE POLISH ARMED FORCES IN GREAT BRITAIN

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FATE IN GREAT BRITAIN OF FORMER MEMBERS OF THE POLISH REGULAR ARMY

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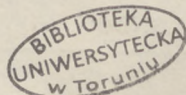
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WITH THE COMPLIMENTS
OF THE ASSOCIATION

The enclosed memorandum is intended to draw your attention to the distressing position expounded in it and to make recommendations for its partial alleviation.



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FATE IN GREAT BRITAIN OF FORMER
MEMBERS OF THE POLISH REGULAR ARMY

FOREWORD

The problem of Polish soldiers in Great Britain arose as one of the consequences of the war waged by the Allies for the cause of freedom.

These men came to Great Britain in the course of the war, not as political emigrés or men seeking employment in a foreign country. They were invited to come here to take part in the defence of this country.

Public opinion in Great Britain is ignorant of the true facts, and has not yet understood how big is the problem of the fate of these soldiers, and how significant. We are convinced that if the British people were fully informed of the hard lot endured by the ex-soldiers of an allied country, they would be deeply concerned with it.

Every man is entitled to decent conditions of life, to just treatment — not to have to drag out his existence in poverty verging on destitution and degradation. This axiom is accepted by all decent-minded people in Great Britain and by all responsible political leaders. Nevertheless, there is in Great Britain today one group of persons of whom it may be said that the accepted rights, if not actually withheld, are in serious jeopardy.

These persons are the former members of the Polish regular army, men who, nobody will seriously deny, did their duty during the war, fighting for the freedom and liberation of the countries subjugated by the enemy. Let us remember that in fulfilling the tasks assigned to them these soldiers were prompted by many pledges which reassured them about their future.

PLEDGES

On the 21st June 1940, after the fall of France, Prime Minister Winston Churchill invited the Polish Armed Forces still in France to come to Great Britain, declaring to the late General Władysław Sikorski — then Polish Prime Minister and Commander-in-Chief: „We will perish together or vanquish together.”

On the 24th August of the same year the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, assured the Poles that „the courage of their soldiers, sailors and airmen would never be forgotten.”

These words were repeated on many occasions and in different forms by the most eminent British personages. Even at the time when Polish interests were most in danger and when the consequences of the solutions imposed on Poland became apparent, foreshadowing a possible refusal by the Polish soldiers under British command to return to their

home country. Mr. Winston Churchill declared in the House of Commons (27.2.1945): „In any event, His Majesty's Government will never forget the debt they owe to the Polish troops who have served them so valiantly.”

And further on: „So far as we are concerned we should think it an honour to have such faithful and valiant warriors dwelling among us as if they were men of our own blood.” (Cf. Hansard, Vol. 408, No. 39, page 1284).

After the end of the war operations, on the eve of the disbandment of the Polish Armed Forces under British Command, Mr. Ernest Bevin, speaking about the Polish soldiers, said in the House of Commons (20.3.1946):

„Those who nevertheless feel compelled to remain abroad in full knowledge of the present situation will be treated, as far as our resources permit, with due recognition of their gallant service.” (Cf. Hansard, 20th March 1946, Vol. 420, No. 106, page 1885: Message from the British Foreign Secretary to all members of the Polish Forces under British Command.)

The War Office message, under the heading: „Polish Resettlement Corps”, published in August 1946 and distributed to every member of the Polish Forces, amongst other things promised:

„The British Army wishes sincerely to do everything which may be possible to assist Polish comrades in arms, who served the common cause in the course of the war.....

„For your own sake you are advised to enlist in the P.R.C. You may be sure that you will be welcomed by the British Army, which will help you by every means to find a place in civilian life in the United Kingdom or abroad...”

.....The duration of service is set for two years in order to have every opportunity of finding employment for you.”

.....The British Army will try hard to prepare you for civil life here or abroad.”

.....The main purpose of the P.R.C. will be to find you permanent employment in civil life...”

„Everything will be done to place you where you may wish.”

.....The P.R.C. was established exclusively for the purpose of assisting you. If you do not enlist in it the British Army will be unable to help you. If you do, we will do everything possible to secure you a good job.”

All these pledges had wide publicity amongst Polish soldiers and Polish civilians. Their purpose was to encourage Poles to do their utmost for the common cause. This cause was understood by all Polish quarters as being truly a common one, and the members of the regular army contributed their due share.

The consequences of failure to abide by these pledges have been most serious for the former members of the Polish regular Army, both in their conditions of everyday life and in their general state of mind.

SCHEMES IN OPERATION.

After the withdrawal of recognition from the Polish Government in Exile in 1945 and the disbandment of the Polish Armed Forces, His Majesty's Government formed the Polish Resettlement Corps.

The main purpose of the P.R.C. was to resettle the soldiers, providing them with good permanent civilian employment (War Office message of August 1946). This could of course have the additional advan-

tage of providing a considerable amount of manpower which could play a useful part in the urgent tasks of reconstruction which faced the British people.

Within the P.R.C. a distinction was made between a small number of soldiers who were assigned certain duties, and the majority. This majority received while they remained in the P.R.C. only part of their pay, sufficient for bare necessities and leaving no margin for saving.

Members of the former Polish Armed Forces as a whole, including both regulars and those enlisted for the duration of the war, are at present employed in the following way:

4,000	soldiers and their dependents are employed in brick and glass works.
6,000	have their own businesses.
8,000	are in the steel industry,
11,000	„ „ „ textile industry,
9,000	„ „ „ mines,
12,500	„ „ agriculture and forestry,
17,000	„ „ building trades,
19,500	„ „ hotels, the catering trade, hospitals etc.

Total, 87,000 employed,

while 9,000 are unfit for work and 6,500 are disabled.

The proportion of manual workers in Great Britain is 22%, while the respective figure for the Poles settled in this country is 80%.

The final report of the P.R.C. stated the following:

„Resettlement has been more successful than was expected Reports from employers are excellent.” (Cf. Manchester Guardian, 1. 10. 1949).

All the ex-soldiers employed are now ordinary British tax-payers, contributing to the assets of this country.

From the British point of view this solution is very satisfactory. From the point of view of the Poles who were not regular soldiers the solution has also been relatively satisfactory. Young people and men with a profession have been resettled without great difficulty, and although they may not all be ideally suited to the ways in which they are employed, it is appreciated that the whole problem of resettlement has been a complex and difficult one.

The position of the ex-regular Polish soldier is, however, quite different. After the army was disbanded he automatically lost the only profession he knew: he was deprived of the pension, which he had always rightly regarded as part of his emoluments, and, he found himself in an extremely difficult position for which his previous life had not prepared him. He was stranded on the labour market, with all his shortcomings, sometimes due to old age, or ruined health, or his lack of vocational training, or all of them.

The Act P.R.S., 1947 foresaw financial assistance for those who — after elapse of their P.R.C. contracts—still could not find employment, namely: Unemployment Benefit, paid by National Insurance, and allowances paid by the National Assistance Board on the strength of the National Assistance Act which replaced the rules concerning assistance to paupers (Poor Law). As a matter of fact both of them are available to any aliens settled in this country within the general framework of the law.

In particularly difficult cases grants may therefore be obtained from the Assistance Board. This allowance is given to people in a distressed financial position or to paupers who are not entitled to an

allowance from any other source. The grant received from the Board helps the recipients not to become beggars, that is to say offenders against the common law. It is meant as a temporary subsidy, paid according to the discretion of the authorities, being a kind of official alms.

Unemployment benefit is intended for men who have lost their jobs, it being understood that this is a temporary allowance and not a permanent means of existence.

At the best, the allowance from either fund is not enough to cover the most modest needs of older members of the regular army. They are in fact reduced to subsistence level, a tragic fate for men who have served an honourable profession and consistently done their duty.

It appears therefore that the Polish ex-soldier is willing to work and contribute efficiently to the economic recovery of Great Britain according to his capacity, but if his background and past occupation have qualified him rather for the sedentary or white-collar type of job, he has very little chance of contributing as efficiently as he would like.

The position of the intelligentsia and the ex-regular officers and N.C.O., especially the older ones, is now critical, for the schemes in operation give them no real prospects.

Let us consider the following facts:

ACTUAL POSITION.

On the strength of four years' experience and examination of the evidence in our possession, we can draw the following conclusions:

High Death Rate. When the P.R.C. was wound up, the final report of this body stated the alarming mortality figures in the ranks of the P.R.C. This report explained these abnormal figures in the following way: „The high death rate accounted for over three thousand, most of whom were aged and infirm members, who could not survive their war-time experiences.” (The Manchester Guardian, 1.10.1949).

Apart from cases of deaths due to war experiences, hardships and depression, the following special and particularly striking examples should be recorded:

A colonel, former Military Attaché (Virtuti Militari, Cross of Military Valour, and other decorations), a major, a brigadier (Virtuti Militari, Cross of Military Valour, British D.S.O.), a captain, a major of the Corps of Military Engineers — died at work, engaged as manual workers.

They were driven to accept manual work by poverty, the attitude, it must be said, adopted towards their affairs in certain Employment Exchanges, and the inadequate assistance which debased their self-respect. In all these cases it could be said that these men could have lived for another twenty or thirty years, as useful members of the community.

Unsuitable employment. White-collar workers and ex-officers have the opportunity to register with an Appointments Office to obtain suitable employment. Unfortunately such work was obtained only in a very few, quite exceptional cases. As a rule ex-regular soldiers are offered jobs as unskilled manual workers of the lowest grade by the Local Labour Exchanges. Generals are employed as lift-men, colonels as porters and dish-washers, cleaners, hospital orderlies, stokers, etc. In many cases they have been obliged to give up their work, having contracted serious illnesses. Many have become infirm on account of unsuitable work.

We wish to quote one example from many others. A group of forty intellectuals and older ex-regular soldiers are employed in a factory. One

of this group is a former member of the Supreme Court, aged 66, another a general over 60 years of age, and the remainder are all over fifty. This group worked for several weeks as a night-shift. It is striking that such an offer was made by the particular Employment Exchange which dealt with their case. The consequences of such work can already be seen. Their state of health in a couple of months is a foregone conclusion. In all these cases the men were obliged to accept the work from sheer poverty, official pressure, and the inadequacy of public assistance, whose receipt in any case they were bound to find degrading.

Unemployed and Unfit for Work. At the end of the war there were already a small group of men unfit for work on account of the hardships they had endured. This group increased rapidly after the winding up of the Polish Resettlement Corps, because of the conditions in which they found themselves.

Poverty increasing from day to day and the progress of moral and physical collapse in this category of men have already constituted a very serious problem. The position was best explained by the report of the Central Committee of the Polish Medical Association on the 25th May 1950. Based on observations by Polish practitioners of their Polish patients over the age of fifty, not employed in their usual professions (ex-regular soldiers belong to this category) and directed to manual work, these statements are very alarming from every point of view. We give below some extracts from this most interesting document:

„An abnormal number of patients over fifty years of age has lately been noticed in the consulting rooms of Polish practitioners: they were men of various professions (with the exception of doctors and dentists) who, without any chance of working in their own professions and with no private means, have been directed to physical labour for which they are utterly unfit...

„In normal circumstances old age changes which occur after fifty decrease the ability to work; as regards Poles living in exile these changes are being considerably accelerated by the following factors: the trying years of war, the change of climate and surroundings at an advanced age, the lack of financial security for the future, emotional shocks, and many other reasons.

„It is justly admitted that with elderly people living under normal conditions the continuance of professional jobs, if not as intense as with younger people, is the perfect means of delaying the process of ageing. But while such people work in their own professions, to which they have been accustomed since early youth, the Polish exiles of the professional classes are mostly doing heavy manual work for the first time in their lives, and this has a depressing effect on their mental and physical health. It requires physical exertion and effort, for very often it is on a piece-work basis. With elderly people negative symptoms appear in a short time: nervous depression, heart and coronary troubles, etc. The ageing process is considerably accelerated. All the mild or chronic diseases become acute and develop rapidly.

„At the moment it would not be possible to produce accurate statistical data based on exact figures. But what the Association can declare, taking full responsibility for the statement, is that daily practice and experience clearly show an alarming deterioration of health and an abnormally accelerated process of ageing in their patients amongst the Polish intelligentsia over fifty years of age and earning their living by manual work.

„We feel it our duty to emphasise that the attention of the competent British authorities should be drawn to this fact.”

MORAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM.

The fate of the Polish ex-regular soldiers has so far been presented from the purely human point of view. But that is only one aspect of the problem. The moral and political factors must not be overlooked, as they have a bearing on both the present and the future.

The British-Polish Alliance of 1939, proposed by Great Britain and accepted by Poland, bound the destiny of the Polish Nation to that of Great Britain. It weighed heavily on the political decisions of the Polish Government in the 1939 crisis and encouraged the Polish Nation in her resistance to Hitlerite aggression.

According to the clauses of this agreement Poland expected British assistance in the event of war and was entitled to assume that such a conflict would be conducted in conformity with Polish interests and war aims.

In the September 1939 campaign Poland fought alone, quite unaided.

In spite of that she did not surrender after the defeat, did not come to terms with the invader, produced no quislings, but on the strength of the clauses of the alliance and prompted by her confidence in the moral values and loyalty of the allies, she prepared for further fierce resistance against the common enemy.

When the very existence of Great Britain was at stake (1940—1941), the Poles were the only allies actively fighting at her side.

The Polish political and military authorities made the utmost effort to organise the struggle against the common enemy, both in the home country and abroad. The contribution of the 1939 campaign in Poland and the war effort of Poland both in the home country and abroad brought to the allied cause the following advantages:

- the experiences of the 1939 campaign, recorded in detail by the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces and forwarded to the Allies,
- the Underground Movement in Poland, engaging considerable enemy forces for the occupation of the country;
- most valuable information, supplied during the whole course of the war by the well organised intelligence service, and of paramount importance for the general conduct of the war. In particular it was due to the Polish intelligence service that Britain learnt details of the V.I. in time to make advance preparations against it.
- The Polish Armed Forces, twice reconstituted during the war, (250,000 men) carried out all the tasks assigned to them, winning the full appreciation of the Allies.
- In the Battle of Britain the Polish Air Force played a role whose importance was out of all proportion to the number of Poles engaged — a fact to which members of the R.A.F. will readily testify.
- The Polish Navy and Merchant Marine contributed their due share to the common war effort.

The foundation of this war effort was supplied by the Polish regular soldiers, trained at the cost of the Polish Nation.

At the end of the war it turned out that only her allies had benefited from these enormous efforts of the Polish Nation and her armed forces. The Poles trusted their Allies. They believed that they were fighting for a common cause.

Judging, however, by the final results, the war was carried on with utter disregard for the most vital Polish interests. Polish political and military quarters were debarred from all bodies charged with the conduct of the war. A series of treaties which decided the fate of Poland already at the end of 1943 were not disclosed to them for many months. The outcome of the war showed, that Poland was reduced to a puppet state ruled from Moscow. A reign of terror was imposed, Poles were deprived of their political liberties and ruthlessly suppressed, and for the Poles in Great Britain there was no way back to freedom in their own land. Nevertheless, although they lost their own country, the Poles in Great Britain were still partners — and faithful partners — in a victorious war. That is the fact which the British people, if they are to keep faith, can never lose sight of.

This memorandum is not the place to discuss the merits as a whole of the Teheran and Yalta agreements, but it is difficult to deny that those Governments which made the decisions have a clear responsibility for their consequences. One of these consequences is the lamentable fate of the Polish regular soldiers now in Great Britain.

In the present position of the world the cause of Poland, apart from its moral aspects, has a great practical importance. In the clash between barbarism, represented by the Soviet side, and Western civilisation, there are also spiritual values which must weigh besides the armed forces and armaments. The cause of Poland stands as a test case and the injustice done her at Teheran and Yalta can in some small degree, even at this late hour, be put right by just treatment of those Poles, whose profession was that of arms.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS.

The arrival of Polish soldiers in Great Britain was due to the course of the war and war developments.

Public opinion in this country is not aware of the conditions in which many of them are now forced to live.

His Majesty's Government, together with the other Allied Governments, has a clear responsibility for the present state of affairs, and there is no other quarter to which ex-regular Polish soldiers can look for justice and some degree of protection.

After the war Polish soldiers were used for the sole benefit of the British economy, and the ex-regular soldiers have in fact been directed almost exclusively to manual work. Attempts to find suitable work for the older members of the Polish forces have largely failed, and the consequences to these people's health and happiness have been disastrous.

The financial assistance so far received by them is inadequate, and the way in which it is given hurts their self-respect. They have received no pensions and their rights have not been secured in any way.

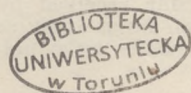
The argument that His Majesty's Government can evade further financial responsibility on the legalistic grounds that there were no provisions in international agreements for the payment of pensions to ex-regular members of Allied forces is, we submit, consistent neither with the dignity nor with the high principles of British democracy.

The ex-regular Polish soldier wishes to work and to be a useful member of the community in this country according to his capacity. Time has shown the overwhelming difficulties in the way of finding adequate work according to that capacity for the great majority of ex-regular soldiers.

He wishes the following principles, proclaimed by His Majesty's Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. C. Attlee, at the end of his broadcast on the 30th July 1950, may also be applied to him:

„Finally, I would ask you to keep ever in mind the value of the things for which we stand, freedom, democracy, justice and the supremacy of the morallaw”.

Justice to ex-regular Polish soldiers will be done only when they are given pensions such as they would be entitled to had the country, to help which Great Britain went to war, remained free. Polish and British regular troops fought for the same cause. They merit similar rewards.

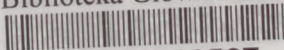


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